



Tokyo Sustainable Seafood Summit addresses seafood industry's human rights problem

By Chris Loew

November 7, 2023



The first fully in-person Tokyo Sustainable Seafood Summit (TSSS) in four years – after [online-only events](#) throughout the Covid-19 pandemic – ran from 17 to 19 October, and the event highlighted human rights issues in the seafood supply chain in the wake of [the bombshell Outlaw Ocean Project report on 9 October](#).

Since its inception in 2015, the event, co-hosted and financially supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, has served as a networking platform for seafood companies and

environmental NGOs to share ideas and discuss solutions to sustainability issues the industry is facing.

This year's edition covered many topics related to sustainability, but human rights abuses in the seafood supply chain were the main focus. TSSS added human rights to the event's program in 2022, as global efforts to tackle the issue in the seafood industry have increased.

For example, the Havant, U.K.-based organization Human Rights at Sea (HRAS) in February 2023 issued a report titled "[Does it Do What it Says on the Tin?](#)" that rates eco-labels on their alignment with its HRAS Key Performance Indicators. Most scored a zero, underscoring the long path forward for the seafood industry and the necessity of continued discussions on the topic. The Marine Stewardship Council has also emphasized that human rights is outside its core mission, but has in the past [highlighted the topic](#) as a key component of its future goals.

The timing of the TSSS coincidentally aligned with the publication of Outlaw Oceans' report, once again bringing the topic of human rights to the forefront of industry sustainability discussions. The report alleged that members of the ethnic Uyghur minority group were relocated and forced to work in Chinese seafood-processing facilities in the eastern province of Xinjiang. This prompted many U.S. retailers to respond quickly to the allegations by [severing or reevaluating their relationships](#) with the involved processors.

A discussion at the summit titled "Human Rights Abuses in the Seafood Supply Chain and the Global Effort to Tackle the Issues" gave an overview of international efforts to deal with human rights issues in which Japanese seafood market players may be complicit. It also covered future actions companies can take to resolve these issues.

Patima Tungpuchaykul, the founder and program manager of the Samut Sakhon, Thailand-headquartered Labour Protection Network Foundation (LPN), [offered her expertise on the issue](#) by talking about the work of her organization, which not only investigates and advocates for vulnerable migrant workers but also stages rescue missions when necessary. Between 2014 and 2016, LPN rescued about 2,000 captive and stranded fishermen from isolated Indonesian islands, an action that subsequently became the subject of a documentary film titled "[Ghost Fleet](#)."

In addition to these missions, the group offers post-rescue services such as healthcare, trauma services, shelter, and legal support; creates safe spaces for migrant children to learn, integrate into local schools, and build a new life in Thailand; researches, develops, and translates rights education materials; advocates for policy change; and conducts labor rights training.

Tungpuchaykul said she believes consumers need to understand how their choices affect human rights and that migrant communities need to receive more education on how to notice and avoid trafficking risks. To achieve the latter goal, she said building a legal aid system in both the country of origin and the destination of migrant workers; creating a network of government, civil society, and labor to assist workers in trouble; establishing a mechanism for returning migrant workers to society effectively; and collecting information in an online database about the recruiting agencies involved in the trafficking of migrants could all aid in curtailing human rights abuses and trafficking.

Ridding supply chains of companies engaging in labor abuse was also the topic of another discussion at the summit titled "Addressing Human Rights Due Diligence by Market Players."

Andy Hickman, the head of the Seafood Ethics Action Alliance (SEA Alliance) – a group of U.K. retailers and suppliers working to improve human rights due diligence in global seafood supply chains – led the discussion; and Shinya Matsuya, the general manager of the Seafoods Product Department of the Product Development Division at AEON Topvalu – a major Japanese supermarket chain based in Chiba – was a featured panelist.

Matsuya outlined the due diligence measures the company has taken in the past.

In 2003, the company established the "AEON Supplier Code of Conduct (CoC)" and began third-party audits of factories for suppliers of its house-brand products. In 2009, the company revised its CoC to include primary raw materials, and in 2021, AEON established a supplier hotline for grievances available in 11 Asian languages, as well as English.

Photo courtesy of the Tokyo Sustainable Seafood Summit



Chris Loew

Contributing Editor reporting from Osaka, Japan

je5c-loew@asahi-net.or.jp